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LETTER

OF

HON. JAMES C. JONES,

OF TENNESSEE,

TO

HIS CONSTITUENTS,

ON

POLITICAL PARTIES: HIS PAST COURSE AND
FUTURE INTENTIONS.

WASHINGTON:
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TO MY CONSTITUENTS.

WASHINGTON, *April 8, 1856.*

Regarding it the duty of a public servant to confer fully and freely with his constituents touching all matters of public interest, I address you this letter. This duty becomes the more necessary at this time, from the anomalous condition of political parties, and the necessity imposed upon me to respond to the inquiry so frequently addressed to me by my political friends, What shall we do—or rather, what do you intend to do in the present complicated state of things?

I shall not so far forget the relation I sustain to you as to presume to dictate to you what you should or should not do. I can only suggest what seems to me to be the course proper to be pursued, and to declare what it is my purpose to do.

In addressing this letter, I intend to embrace my entire constituency, without distinction of party or name, because I have neither the right nor the disposition to separate myself from the obligation under which I feel to be the representative of the entire people of the State. But frankness requires me to say, that the necessity which imposes upon me this present duty, grows mainly out of the interest manifested by that portion of my constituents with whom I have heretofore acted; and by whose agency I was called to occupy the position I now hold, in knowing what course I shall pursue in the coming political contest.

It is my purpose to deal plainly and candidly with you ; yet, in the strange and unprecedented revolution of things, I can scarcely hope to find that community of sentiment and feeling existing between myself and the party with which I have heretofore acted, and to which I am indebted for all that I am as a public man, that has hitherto characterized our intercourse and guided our actions. Whilst this fear is a source of painful regret to me, yet, if I should, in the fast approaching end of my official connection with you, hesitate to speak plainly and honestly, I should not only prove myself unworthy of all the honors you have conferred upon me, but also secure to myself convictions of merited contempt.

It is well known to you all that I have been, ever since my entrance into public life, a Whig of the old school, taking the patriot sage of Ashland as my political exemplar—the star by which I was wont to be guided. In looking back through the long vista of the past, and calling to my aid all the advantages which an increase of years and experience are presumed to bring, I find nothing to regret in the adoption of that political creed. It commanded my approval, and by that chart I was content to steer my bark, amidst the storms and breakers by which it was surrounded.

The proclamation is being daily made by three prominent and leading parties of the country, “that the Whig party is dead.” This annunciation may be grateful to those who make it, but it brings no pleasure to my heart. I believed in its principles, was ever ready to abide its fortunes ; in its prosperity and triumphs I rejoiced, in its misfortunes and defeats I wept. If others can march with rude and careless step over its remains, I, for one, must be excused from participating in any such strange unnatural vocation. I would rather bedew the sod under which it is said to repose, with tears of grateful memory.

Whether this declaration, so exultingly made, be true or not, I shall not stop to inquire. It is enough (nay, more than enough for me) to know that this great party, which once commanded the affections of its followers and challenged the respect of its enemies, if not now dead, has fallen from its high and proud estate, and is now in disorder and confusion.

By what agency this result was produced—by whom this great wrong to the affections and sympathies of the living and the memories of the illustrious dead was done—it is not necessary that I

should inquire ; I only rejoice to know that no stain of the blood of the victim is to be found on my garments.

Public position always carries with it its responsibilities, and the obligation of fidelity to those from whom we receive them is either expressed or implied. The position I now hold has brought its responsibilities, and I acknowledge its obligations. The questions submitted to me daily, almost hourly—Why stand weeping over the grave of your buried political affections?—why not join the American or Democratic party?—I am ready to answer;—because I do not agree with either of them, and because the obligation I assumed in accepting the position I hold contemplated no such result.

I was elected to the United States Senate as a Whig, committed to the support of Whig principles and Whig men, and I have ever felt myself bound, by every consideration of duty and honor, to vindicate and sustain them in my official position. I have endeavored faithfully to redeem the pledge thus given, and I trust I shall be faithful to the end. Soon I shall return my commission to those from whom I received it, and I trust in God no stain of dishonor or unfaithfulness will attach to it.

Thus much for the past. Let us turn to the present and the future.

With feelings such as I entertain, and have endeavored to present under ordinary circumstances, when no great public interest was at stake, I should be inclined to take no part in the contest, but would content myself with the quietude and retirement of private life. But, under the circumstances that surround us—amidst the dangers that threaten not only the peace and happiness of the country, but even the integrity of the Constitution and the stability of the Union—no patriot can feel indifferent, no patriot has a right to fold his arms and refuse to do all he can to arrest such evils. I cannot be a silent or indifferent spectator of scenes fraught with such momentous consequences to all that is held most dear to the lover of constitutional liberty.

It cannot have escaped the observation of the most casual that a state of things exists at this time wholly unprecedented in the history of parties. Obtuse, indeed, must be the man who does not read, in the signs of the times, dangers most imminent to the perpetuity of the country. Circumstances seem to be combining together which, if not arrested, must eventually end in the overthrow of this fair fabric

of human liberty. To avert a calamity so full of all that is fearful, so full of an utter overthrow of all the hopes of the lovers of freedom throughout the world, the best energies of the wise, the good, and the patriotic, are invoked.

In order fully to appreciate the difficulties and dangers that surround us, it is necessary to look at things as they are. And he who, through indifference or the bias of party prejudice, refuses to make this examination, betrays a disregard of his highest interests, that can find no palliation in the requirements of duty or patriotism.

What is the condition of parties at this time, and what is likely to be the result of the approaching presidential election?

You may not have given to this important question much serious consideration, and may not, therefore, have had your fears aroused. You may flatter yourselves that all is well—that there is no danger to be apprehended. If this be your condition, I would dispel the delusion which, if persisted in, I fear may prove fatal. In order to accomplish this, I beg your attention to a short statement of facts as they are now presented to the country.

As before stated, there are now three prominent parties in the country, each of which, it is certain, will present their candidate for President and Vice President. The American party has already given us the names of their candidates. Soon, the Democratic and (so-called) Republican parties are to hold conventions to present the names of their candidates. With three candidates in the field is it at all certain that an election can be effected by the people? There is no such certainty; but there are many well-grounded fears that an election by the people will be defeated, and that the House of Representatives will be the tribunal before which this great question must be tried and decided. With the late protracted contest in that body for the election of Speaker, and its results before us, it cannot be that any sane man who desires to protect the rights of the South can wish, or would be willing, to see our rights submitted to such an arbitrament, or the permanency of the Union exposed to so severe a test. But, should an election obtain before the people, which of these parties is most likely to succeed? In order to form something like a correct, enlightened judgment on this subject, it is proposed to inquire what is to be the nature of this contest? By what circumstances is it to be surrounded, and what questions are to be settled by it? May I ask what issues are to be involved in this contest? Is it a bank, tariff,

distribution of the proceeds of the public lands, internal improvements, the acquisition of more territory? Is it the annunciation of the Monroe doctrine, as proclaiming our foreign policy? Is it any one, or all of these? No, not one of them all is spoken of as the issue upon which this great battle is to be fought. Indeed, important as some of these are, they seem scarcely to be thought of or cared for. The only issue of a practical, political, or legislative character, (as far as I understand it,) presented by the American party, is an amendment, or abrogation of the naturalization law. That Americans shall rule America—that natives have rights superior to foreigners—are presented as arguments or adjuncts.

I do not propose to debate this question. I will, however, say, that I should not object to a prudent, patriotic amendment of the naturalization laws.

What is tendered by the falsely-styled Republican party, standing out in bold relief, emblazoned on their banners in glaring capitals, is opposition to slavery. This is presented in all the varied shapes and forms, suited to the tastes and caprices of all; but at last all these principles concenter in the one idea of opposition to slavery, or the prostration of what they please to denominate the slave power. Some are, or say they would be, content with the repeal of the fugitive slave law; others demand the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia; some, that the slave trade, as between the States, shall be interdicted that no more slave States shall be admitted into the Union; others, that Congress shall prohibit the introduction of slavery into the Territories—that slavery shall be abolished everywhere.

But all these factions are to be harmonized; all these shades of opinion are to be reconciled, and the battle is to be fought on the Kansas and Nebraska act; this is to be probably the sole and only plank in their platform; and they propose to accomplish their purposes by attacking us in detail, and, if they can succeed in carrying the outposts by attacking one of them at a time, then the citadel, which is slavery in the States, must soon capitulate. 'Tis thus they reason.

What issue or issues the Democratic party will present, or whether they will be content simply to accept those tendered by the other parties, I am not advised. Only one thing in this connection is certain, and that is, they cannot refuse to accept the issue presented by the Black Republican party; they claim the paternity of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and must, and will, I doubt not, defend it to the last.

In this brief review of the attitude of parties, it is obvious that the Abolition party—the opponents of slavery of every hue, shape, and complexion throughout the entire Union—are to be harmonized on the one idea and purpose of the repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska act, or the reëstablishment of the prohibition of slavery in these Territories. This is what they call the Malakoff; if this falls, then a surrender on our part, and the taking of Sebastopol. It may be that they reckon without their host.

Whatever may be said of the treason that guides and animates this party, we cannot withhold our admiration of the bold, manly, and defiant manner in which they proclaim their purposes, and challenge us to the conflict. Can we with safety or honor decline the invitation thus boldly given? In my judgment, we cannot. The issue is fairly made, and it must be met. There can be, ought to be, no evasion. Let us, then, in a corresponding spirit of promptness and boldness, meet them in the field they have selected; and this we are constrained to do, unless we have made up our minds to capitulate and surrender ourselves to these usurpers. If we are ready for this, then the battle is already fought, and our disgrace and degradation are full and complete, and we are only fit to be slaves. I repeat—the issue is fairly made, boldly tendered, and must be met. The question, the great vital question of the equality of the States and their rights under the Constitution, are involved and must be maintained, or the Union is dissolved. This question must be settled, this battle has to be fought sooner or later.

Efforts have been made from time to time by the wise, the good, and the patriotic, to avert this necessity. Compromises, delays, and postponements have been resorted to, with what success let history teach. These patriotic efforts have served as narcotics—quieting the nerves, but not removing the disease—they have served to allay the angry and aggressive passions of the enemies of slavery for a season, and to lull the friends of the Constitution into the dream of a delusive security. Experience shows how impotent such efforts have been, and must ever be, to bring permanent repose to the country.

We want no other compromises than such as the Constitution gives. For one, I shall be satisfied with nothing less. The temporizing expedients, however patriotically intended, have heretofore served only to enable the enemies of the South to recuperate their weakened energies and replenish their magazines, in order that they may return

to the conflict with increased vigor and accumulated strength. The quiet it gives is only the calm that precedes the storm. No considerate man can doubt but that this question—if we are to remain as one people—must be settled, and that speedily. We cannot postpone it long if we would, and ought not if we could. An evasive policy, a temporizing course, the administration of political nostrums, instead of soothing the fevered brain of fanaticism, seem but to madden them and render their hatred of our institutions more violent and implacable.

What has the South to gain by postponing this settlement? Shall we be stronger next year than this, or will they be weaker then than now? New States are soon to be added to the Confederacy. In a few years, six or eight more States may be expected to be admitted into the Union—most, if not all, of them free States—thus further diminishing the equilibrium between the free and slave States, increasing the power of the one, and consequently diminishing that of the other.

I know the over-cautious and timid still insist upon a further postponement, saying, "Put off the evil hour as long as you can." Is there any safety in this? I seek to preserve this Union. There are no means compatible with justice and honor to which I would not resort to accomplish such a result; and it is from a firm, immovable conviction that a determined, resolute purpose to have the question met and settled, now furnishes the best, if not the only hope of accomplishing it, that I protest against any further evasion of the question, and counsel a bold, prompt, and manly acceptance of the issue tendered.

I have presented some reasons why we have nothing to gain by delay. All we get is increased strength on their part, coupled with arrogance, insult, or injury. Let me illustrate this position further. A proposition was made in the Senate in 1852 to repeal the fugitive slave law. This proposition received only four votes. Again the proposition was renewed in 1855, and it received nine votes; and I am informed by the most reliable authority that it can now command fifteen votes in that body; and from the same reliable source I learn that a majority of the House of Representatives are in favor of a repeal of this law; and if they do not pass an act repealing it in that body, it will not be because they have not the power and the will to do so, but because they doubt its expediency. What an alarming increase is here seen, and what a striking commentary on the policy

and wisdom of further postponement. A few years since there was in the House of Representatives a little squad of Abolitionists, so small in numbers, so insignificant in talent as to excite scarcely any other feeling than that of pity or contempt. Now we see them able to elect a presiding officer—the third officer under the Government—one of the most uncompromising enemies of slavery anywhere to be found.

Are we to gain nothing from experience? Shall we shut our eyes and close our ears for fear we may hear the distant thunder or see the flashing lightning that presages the gathering and coming storm? If we are not able to assert and maintain our rights now, when, tell me, when shall we be?

To you, who have known me always, and before whom my antecedents are, I need not repeat protestations of my devotion to the Union; but frankness compels me to say, unless this constant war of aggression, this incessant war of insult and injury, can be arrested, the preservation of this Union is a hopeless fancy—an idle delusion. And you must allow me to say, with equal frankness and deep regret, that unless this war should cease—unless the rights secured to us by the Constitution shall be respected; unless our property can be secured from robbery and confiscation; unless our honors and our feelings shall be respected; unless we are permitted to hold our places in the Union on the terms of equality as prescribed by the Constitution—without degradation; unless we can live together in peace and quiet, as did our fathers—if these things cannot be accorded to us, then the sooner we separate the better. We can never consent to retain these political relationships at the expense of honor or the surrender of our rights. To hold it, at such a price would cover us with a mantle of infamy; and the spirits of our fathers would rise up in judgment to condemn the degeneracy of their sons. Can we lend ourselves to such prostitution? *Never, never, never!*

Some may suppose I have drawn this picture too strongly—that it is not so dark as I present it. Be not deceived. The secret purposes and machinations of your enemies are but merely sketched. The inquiry doubtless presents itself to your mind, Is there no escape from these apprehended evils? Is there no way of arresting results so fearful, on which we seem to be driving with terrible and increasing velocity? I hope there is; and it is this hope that bids me warn you of the danger, in order that you may apply the remedy.

Our opponents will present one unbroken front. Already their ranks are being marshaled for the fray. All other dissensions are to be hushed. All discord is to be banished. All differences of opinion are to be waived. They are to stand, as one man, on one isolated point, *Down with slavery!*

Successfully to meet and resist this united, combined effort of our enemies, there must be a corresponding effort on our part. We must have the same union; the same surrender of our prejudices; the same waiver of opinion on matters of minor importance. We must stand together for the Constitution and the Union; for in this, and in this alone, is there safety.

Appearances, I grant, are full of discouragement; but, amidst all the surrounding gloom, there is a star of hope to cheer the heart of the patriot, bidding him "hope on, hope ever." I am opposed to any political geographical line. I deprecate all issues of a purely sectional character, and I despise all sectional parties; and it is in order to crush out all such parties that I would exhort all national conservative, Constitution-abiding, Union-loving men, of all parties to unite together for the purpose of arresting the further progress of this party, seeking to advance its fortunes at the expense of the peace of the country, and the safety of the Union, by advocating a question purely and essentially sectional. I do not look to the South alone to accomplish this work. Unaided by the conservative men of the North, we are wholly inadequate to the task. If the entire people of the non-slaveholding States are to be regarded as inimical to our rights and institutions, then any further hope of pacification, any further struggle for harmony, and a recognition of our rights, is vain and useless. I am happy, however, to know that such is not the case. Many of the truest, boldest, and most fearless defenders of the constitutional rights of the South are to be found in the free States. I have seen them throw themselves in the breach, in defense of our rights, with a promptness, gallantry, and manliness that challenged the admiration, and might justly excite the emulation, of the most chivalrous son of the South. Many Whigs, Democrats, and Americans at the North are as loyal to the Constitution and all its guarantees as are the men of the South; and if all these conservatives would be united, (and why may they not?) they, I doubt not, would constitute a majority in many of the free States.

In this condition of things, why, I ask, should not the South, which

has so much at stake, and for the rights of which these gallant men of the North have contended so faithfully, abandon all its bickerings, petty strifes, and party prejudices, and stand together for the Constitution and the Union. Thus united in defense of a common interest, and in resistance to common wrongs, we might, with hope and confidence, appeal to the conservative men of the North to come to the rescue. Such an appeal I know would not be unavailing or unheeded. But, divided as we are, intestine war raging amongst us with wildest fury, with what sort of confidence can we ask our friends of the free States to lend us their aid? The course being pursued by the South in this critical juncture of affairs is, in my judgment, the consummation of folly and madness.

What is there in the creeds of the Democratic, American, or Whig party that can weigh for a moment in the scales against the integrity of the Union? What question, cherished by either of them, that they are not ready to postpone or abandon, for the sake of the Union? I ask no man to abandon his principles, but I do ask all men who love the Constitution to waive their opinions on minor and unimportant questions, for the graver and more vital one, the preservation of the country. I am not a member of the American or Democratic parties, and, however much I may differ from them on some subjects, yet I am ready to unite with them in this great, and I hope last, struggle for the assertion and maintenance of our rights. If such an Union as this could be effected, the battle would have been already fought, the victory won, and the disturbers of peace, these enemies of the Constitution and the country, would be sent howling back to the dark and infernal dens from which they came. Can a consummation so devoutly to be wished for be effected? I would to Heaven it could—but I confess, in this hour, so ruled by madness, I fear it cannot be done. If this hope, so ardently cherished, is doomed to disappointment, what then remains to be done? I speak not for others, but for myself. I seek to dictate to no one, for I am not willing that any shall dictate to me.

I do not advise the running of a Whig candidate for the Presidency—we could not hope to succeed—it would only complicate our difficulties and increase the chances of the election of a Black Republican—to the accomplishment of such result I can never lend myself.

Just here I hope I may be allowed one word of communion with

that little band who have stood fast by their guns—have never hauled down their colors amidst the general desolation that has swept over our once strong and always gallant party. It is to this little band, always fearless and faithful, that I would address a few words in the fullness of affection. Though small in numbers, yet our responsibilities are great. Although we may not have any gallant captain of our own choosing, as was our fortune in other days, one whose voice was ever heard above the battle's din, one whose white plume was ever seen waiving proudly in the thickest of the fight, cheering the hearts of his followers; though they only live in the holiest memories of our hearts, yet let us not forget—we will never forget—that we have a country. They may rob us of much, but our country remains to us. We will never surrender it except in death. It is for us to determine what duty requires at our hands, and when the path is once seen, I know you will tread it with firm, unfaltering step. Unable of ourselves to elect a candidate of our own choice, still the privilege remains to us to choose for ourselves among the candidates that may be presented to the country.

Left, as I am, to decide for myself what I ought to do in view of all the difficulties that lie in my way, fully impressed with the responsibility that rests upon me, I have calmly surveyed the whole ground, and my judgment is deliberately formed. I shall stand where I am, just as I am, and wait the coming of future developments. We have before us the names of the candidates of the American party and their principles. I shall wait and see who the Democratic party will present to us, and what principles they proclaim. When the candidates are all before us, I will cast my vote for that man and with that party which I think most likely to protect the Constitution, preserve the Union, and drive back the horde of northern vandals who seek to usurp our rights, and finally to possess themselves of the citadel of liberty. For the present I have but one political ambition, but one active, absorbing, political principle: ambitious to be an humble agent in preserving our rights, protecting our honors, and forever crushing out and annihilating these disturbers of the peace, invaders of our rights, and traitors to the Constitution; to be one of the humblest in the accomplishment of this, is all I ask—it would be glory enough for me.

You may ask, are you going to join the American party? I answer, no. Are you going to join the Democratic party? Again I answer, no. I am going for the country. If I am satisfied that the American party

can best preserve the honor of the country, and protect our rights, however much I may deprecate their course, I shall vote with them. If I shall believe the Democrats best able to achieve these great ends, notwithstanding the many scars I bear on my person, received at their hands, they shall have my vote.

This is my position. Let me see the men, and what they propose, I shall then judge for myself what duty requires me to do—take my position fearlessly, and stand by it faithfully. I have endeavored, thus briefly and candidly, to present to you my impressions of the dangers that threaten you. I have felt constrained to give you this warning; it may be, as others have been, unheeded. If so, I shall regret it; but I shall have the consciousness of having endeavored to discharge my duty.

In view of all that has transpired, and is daily transpiring, the greatly increased and constantly increasing strength and arrogance of the Abolition party, all their better malignant denunciation of southern rights and southern men, from the press, the hustings and the pulpit, in Congress and out of it; if, in view of all these things, all these facts and warnings, the South cannot be aroused to a sense of its danger, then I despair of anything breaking the fatal slumber in which they repose, until the bell from this Capitol shall toll the funeral knell of the Union. When this terrible sound shall arouse you from your long, fatal sleep, your waking will be too late.

My task is done, my duty performed, the issue is in your hands; for myself, I have but little to hope for or expect, and thank God I have nothing to fear.

JAMES C. JONES.

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